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AFGHANISTAN, ALL ARTICLES, FEATURED, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan failed long before the Taliban took over

Just days after the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Taliban seized power. **Hager Ali** argues that the US army and its allies foundered because they couldn't resolve two simple questions: What was the democratic end state actually supposed to look like? And was it ever attainable through military involvement?

Two weeks ahead of the US military's planned withdrawal from Afghanistan, events unfolded quickly. **On 15 August 2021**, the Taliban advanced from the country's periphery to capture the capital, Kabul. The US and German Federal Army retreated hastily, **leaving local collaborators behind**. The Afghan National Army, meanwhile, **dissolved as soon as the situation destabilised**.

To make sense of how the work of two decades unravelled within days, it is important to understand not just the strategy behind the NATO-led **International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)** and **Resolute Support**, but why that strategy failed to tie up loose ends.

Winning local hearts and minds

When NATO took over charge of ISAF from the US in 2003, violence surged up as ousted Taliban fighters regrouped. Quashing the escalating insurgency was not possible through blunt military force; it required a

new strategy. Against a backdrop of recurring insurgencies, US Military General David Petraeus **developed a counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine**. His was a modern approach to countering insurgents, loosely based on British colonial warfare.

The modern twist of COIN doctrine is that 'winning the hearts and minds' of the indigenous population subserves countering insurgents. It severs the counterinsurgents from their support and resources, in contrast with the indiscriminate crackdown common in colonial-style counterinsurgency.

'winning the hearts and minds' of the indigenous population effectively severs it from support and resources

The doctrine outlines several stages, from clearing insurgent threats to holding territory and building. The build-stage entails consolidating a safe and secure environment and transferring primary responsibility for security to domestic security forces. But the end-state is not concretised beyond re-establishing normal administrative procedures, developing local authorities, and establishing rule of law.

From ISAF to Resolute Support

From 2006–2010 onwards, the US Military and, to a lesser extent, other armies, applied this approach in Afghanistan and Iraq, frequently coupling it with the use of drones. In 2013, security tasks transferred to Afghan security forces. As this occurred, the numbers of foreign troops reduced, and ISAF transitioned into Operation Resolute Support. This is **where the US and Germany maintained the largest troop contingencies**. Resolute Support retained the mission objectives from the build-stage.

COIN mission goals, including governance and development, seemed elusive not only in the strategic doctrine, but also to forces on the ground

The **German Federal Army's central role in Resolute Support** was to consult and train Afghan security forces. It also pledged tactical support to the US where needed, and to secure and protect German diplomatic and consular representation.

Germany's involvement was largely conditional on US presence. Surprisingly, it did not follow a distinct or independent COIN strategy. German military personnel even complained that **orders from ISAF HQ were vague, confounded strategy with tactics, and often merely adopted from the US Army's COIN manual**. Mission goals, including governance and development, seemed elusive not only in the strategic doctrine, but also to forces on the ground.

Militaries in too deep, and out of their depth

Indeed, none of the **field manuals** or **tactical guidelines** define standards, or even clear indicators, for any goal concerning counterinsurgencies, handover to civilians, or governance. The transition from military-assisted democratisation to civilian Afghan authorities is often incoherent and intangible. It is hardly surprising, then, that key institutions, including the Afghan National Army, collapsed as fast as they did. Rather than standing on their own, foreign powers had been propping them up for years.

Through the COIN doctrine, military responsibilities stretched far into civilian domains such as establishment of the rule of law. This, unfortunately, also came at the expense of building professional military and security forces in Afghanistan. Conversely, civilian democratisation efforts continually neglected to connect the dots between military professionalism and democratic consolidation.

The Afghan National Army, much like underlying Afghan society, has historic ethnic fractures between

Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazara, Uzbeks and others. These pre-existing fractures eroded internal coherence from the get-go. Western armed forces lacked cultural or historical competences to appropriately train, or establish professionalism, among the Afghan army.

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Resolute Support's final transition from military-assisted state-building and democratisation to civilian political agents was unrealistic even before the recent crisis unfolded. No one had sketched out how strengthening police and military forces would ultimately result in rule of law where young and fragile civilian institutions could retain supremacy over older and more institutionalised military and paramilitary forces.

It was, in the main, foreign military forces which planned and led the stabilisation process. Such a process could very well result in the same civil-military imbalances that have underpinned the stubborn democratic deficit across the Middle East since colonial independence.

Joining the dots between military and democracy

'Winning hearts and minds' served only to import Western foreign troops' goals rather than to grow domestic institutions organically. Understanding the operational environment was a major aspect of counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. But it was never truly applied to forge a system of governance that could survive historic legacies and ongoing instability. Instead, Western troops merely used it to combat insurgents more effectively.

Western military forces never understood the operational environment in Afghanistan well enough to forge a government that could survive ongoing instability in the region

Within a matter of days, the work of the last two decades collapsed like a house of cards. This was, in large part, due to nobody knowing what type of democratic endgame was needed in Afghanistan to stick, regardless of foreign presence.

A frictionless transition from foreign militaries to local political agents is hardly possible if the militaries implementing this transition are already struggling to formulate concrete steps for a military-to-civilian handover. The US military and its allies had become so deeply entangled in Afghanistan's stability that they couldn't leave without the democratic achievements unravelling.

The failure of Resolute Support should concern scholars as much as policymakers. Nation building, democratisation, and military behaviour are often studied separately. Likewise, policymakers compartmentalise these issues, or focus on one at the expense of the others.

For most former colonies, military behaviour – whether of foreign or domestic forces – plays a decisive role in state-building. Recent violent events in Afghanistan show how, ultimately, military behaviour is also essential to a nation's democratic survival.

This article presents the views of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the ECPR or the Editors of *The Loop*.

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